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Raymond Inkabi Nwalieli

International Coalition for the Eradication of Hunger and Abuse, Nigeria

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INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS-IDPS STEREOTYPES AND PERCEPTIONS IN NIGERIA

Raymond Inkabi Nwalieji

*Director of Volunteer Service, International Coalition for the Eradication of Hunger and Abuse (ICEHA),
Nigeria.*

ABSTRACT

As Nigeria continues to grapple with the unprecedented rise in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), interventions for IDPs is now a humanitarian priority. This paper examines the social perceptions of IDPs, humanitarian responses bordering around building long term solutions, provision of specific needs for integration, voluntary return, fighting trauma, and economic isolation. It further recommends how responses should be better harmonized for sustained impact, with an ultimate goal to have IDPs return back home to normal or improved levels of life - providing safety and security, sustained livelihoods, employment, housing and shelter, as against settling perpetually in camps.

Key Words: IDPs-(internally displaced persons, perceptions), humanitarian response

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, internal displacement dates as far back as 1967, and is largely caused by conflicts relating to land rights, religion, ethnicity, herdsmen and farmers clashes and of recent the Boko Haram Insurgency in the Northeast of Nigeria. During the Biafra war (1967-1970), more than two million people died and ten million people became internally displaced due to the Nigeria's government attacks against the Biafra secessionists in the South east (ACLED, 2017).

In November 2016, an estimated 30,000 residents of slums in Lagos were displaced because of large-scale development projects (Aljazeera, 2017). And as of 2015, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) estimates that there were almost 2,152,000 IDPs in Nigeria. This figure is based on an assessment conducted in 207 Local Government Areas (LGA) covering 13 states of Northern Nigeria: Abuja (13,481 IDPs); Adamawa (136,010); Bauchi (70,078); Benue (85,393); Borno (1,434,149); Gombe (25,332); Kaduna (36,976); Kano (9,331); Nassarawa (37,553); Plateau (77,317); Taraba (50,227); Yobe (131,203); and Zamfara (44,929). Of the total figure of IDPs, the assessment indicates that 12.6 per cent were displaced due to communal clashes, 2.4 per cent by natural disasters and 85 per cent as a result of insurgency attacks by Islamists. (IOM/NEMA, 2014).

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Humanitarian response requires information on the social perceptions of the affected populations to deliver aid and respond to needs in a timely manner. The pattern of displacement in Nigeria is characterized by unplanned sudden movements of people seeking protection from violence. According to the International Organization for Migration (2016), the provision of aid, relief and humanitarian assistance to displaced populations is very dependent on the knowledge of the perception thresholds of IDPs in camps and host communities where they have found temporary refuge. The aim of the paper is to assess the general attitude of the local populations toward IDPs; examine stereotypes and prejudices, and evaluate the humanitarian response for IDPs with the objective of understanding the evolving needs of displaced populations. The results may be used to guide the response strategy of government, relief and aid organizations and other stakeholders.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL EXCLUSION THEORY

The theory used for the explanation in this study is the social exclusion theory. The theory argues that social exclusion subject individuals and groups to discriminatory practices that expose them to humiliations and deprivations. It confirms

that social exclusion detaches and alienates some groups of individuals from mainstream society with resultant negative effects on their citizenship and other socio-economic rights. These exclusions are not just limited to material resources but also to matters like social participation, culture and education, access to social services and power. The theory is associated with the works of scholars such as Pacione, 1997; Lee et al, 1997; Black and Muddiman, 1997; Walker, 1997; Hills, 1998 among others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Nigeria the causes of most internal displacements are closely interwoven with four other categories of causes: Religious conflicts, Agricultural policies, Administrative boundaries, Environmental issues and most recently terrorism. Religious clashes which lead to displacement occur mainly in the North between Muslims and Christians and are related to the introduction of the Islamic legal system, Sharia, in several northern states, but also involve an ethnic dimension as well.

Agricultural policies also have favoured large-scale agricultural projects but at the same time have forced farmers away from their land. This results directly in communal violence, often of an ethnic character, over borderlands and fishing waters. As a result of increasing desertification on Nigeria's northernmost fringes, many pastoral people or Fulani-herdsmen push southwards in search of grazing land, accounting to some extent for the conflict between farming communities, farmers, and the pastoral Hausa-Fulani people along grazing routes.

Conflicts related to the creation and recognition of new administrative boundaries like Nigeria's ceding of the *Bakassi* Peninsula to the republic of Cameroun following the judgment by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on 10th October 2002, (ICJ, 2002) led to tensions and waves of displacement to the natives. Such instances have been another major factor of displacement. Where new borders are created, the boundaries are often highly contested, especially where it has fueled tensions between various ethnic groups.

Others are conflicts relating to environmental issues from the oil exploration in the Niger Delta have also been a factor behind displacements in the communities, as the exploration has been associated with state violence, communal disputes, environmental pollution and a worsening economic and material situation in the communities.

PERCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Most Nigerians have come across IDPs at one time or the other either in camps or host communities. In natural disaster zones, urban renewal, conflict and post-conflict areas with large IDP populations, almost half of the local populations have had direct experience, while others might be influenced based on information gained from social media, and online news articles.

However, opinions of the general population are somewhat more favorable towards working IDPs in contrast to unemployed who greatly depend on government and aid agencies or benevolent individuals for relief. Most Nigerians do not know the provision of humanitarian assistance for IDPs is mandated by law. IDPs are still under the jurisdiction of their own government and may not claim any rights additional to those shared by their compatriots (Vincent, 2000). However, IDPs are often in need of special protection, because the government responsible for protecting them at times lacks the political will and commitments, or by its actions cause displacement. Despite the differences in legal status and entitlement to aid from the international humanitarian community, the causes and the experience of being displaced is often similar to both IDPs and refugees. Consequently, IDPs may not feel welcomed, despite sharing the same citizenship as the host population. The distinctive features are movement which is coerced, involuntary and resulting in displacement within national borders. Those internally displaced by conflict, natural and man-made disasters, including development related projects, require protection and assistance as they are forced out of their homes without adequate resettlement, compensation and respect for human rights. Significant developments in the field of internal displacement IDPs are 'at risk' populations around the world (Cohen & Deng, 1998). Thus, IDPs are perceived as citizens who have found themselves in an unfavorable situation who are in need of help.

IDPs are generally perceived as a population that is suffering, vulnerable and in need of help. Ordinarily, negative characteristics, such as aggressiveness, unwillingness to work, and misuse of aid are inherent to specific individuals, not to IDPs in general.

However, some maintain more negative stereotypes about IDPs from political views; unwillingness to work but depend on aid; aggressiveness towards locals; inability to quickly adjust to norms of host communities; to the desire for special treatment fitting their circumstances. And thus, people outside Nigeria's northeast are more likely to blame IDPs for the situation in which they find themselves. In Lagos State for example, many have the least direct interaction with IDPs, with many who have not spoken with a single IDP and are unaware of any IDPs living in the state, and therefore have less opportunity to make their judgment about IDPs based on personal experience.

Personal biases and stigma also play negative roles where IDPs are shunned away from public schools, utilities, and vendors charge them more than fair prices and they often find it difficult to secure job or accommodation.

Most IDPs feel that the quality and frequency of food distributions have been steadily deteriorating. Items routinely go missing from the food banks, the number of food coupons is reduced, and there are distribution delays or bureaucracies in the camps. They also report insufficient supplies of basic food items such as flour, oil, and vegetables.

NGOs have been known to distribute food items such as rice, maize, beans, and oil, but these items are not sufficient. So, people are forced to exchange their dry food rations, so that they can buy vegetables and meat as supplement.

HEALTHCARE

IDPs call attention to a general lack of adequate healthcare, with insufficient medical supplies at dispensaries mentioned multiple times. And problems of accessing medical assistance is also reported in urban areas, with IDPs in host communities lamenting the fact that, they cannot afford transportation to the hospital where need arises, nor would they be able to afford prescribed medication for some medical cases.

EDUCATION

The availability and quality of education for children is a serious cause for concern among IDPs, those in cities report that not all children have the opportunity to attend school and those in camps said that while schools are accessible, the teaching is very poor. And in camps, the education that is available is not always structured or consistent, and they described how many schools lack resources and qualified teachers. Also many parents outside of camps are often sad, because in some cases IDPs children are being shunned away from public.

EMPLOYMENT

For IDPs it is nearly impossible to find work, as there are very few jobs available usually in camps or host communities. Nonetheless, there is still a strong desire to work and be self-sufficient. They lament being unemployed and staying at home or in their tents all day.

Those who find employment are often those with some level of education, women, and those living in host communities. While for the women skills such as sewing, means they can earn an income without facing the barriers of leaving the camp and the male IDPs often face strong rejection from communities.

SHELTER

Families are usually overcrowded in small living spaces in dirty conditions, with very little, if any, privacy. A primary concern for them was the inadequacy of the shelter provided. Many IDPs said that the tents are too hot in the dry season, and will likely be too cold in the *harmattan*. IDPs feel that, they should be compensated for their homes that were

destroyed, and always appeal to the government as well as NGOs to help in rebuilding their homes and communities in order for them to be able to return home.

WATER AND SANITATION

Many IDPs reported a shortage of water in camps. With some pointing to a lack of potable water as well as the bad smell, color, and taste of available water, leading to increased health risks and financial burdens as people resort to buying sachet water. IDPs complained poor sanitation and waste disposal, poor hygiene is making their children sick.

ELECTRICITY

Access to electricity is a problem in some host communities and IDPs camps. Those living in host communities have access to electricity as the local population would, but face difficulties covering the cost. Food is also cooked in open fires, making cooking difficult. The lack of proper cooking facilities means that camp residents are often forced to cook over an open fire, which presents safety hazards, as the tents are extremely flammable.

CORRUPTION, BRIBERY & FAVOURITISM

Favoritism and acquaintances in camps between IDPs and officials were cited as factors which determine access to services, rather than need. There is discrimination in the distribution of food rations, medical supplies, and other non-food items with some having more than others, while some have barely enough to feed themselves and their families. In most cases, women and children are most vulnerable, with some instances leading to rape, food for sex and other forms of repeated violence by camp officials.

LACK OF MONITORING & TRANSPARENCY

IDPs prefer monitoring by aid agencies is needed to instill fairness and equality in the distribution of services. The fact that government reliefs and aid organizations are said to delegate these responsibilities, there is mismanagement of resources by camp officials which leads to anger and frustration by IDPs. This has strengthened the perception that most organizations are detached from the reality of the camps, have weak monitoring and evaluation structures and are primarily consumed with higher-level bureaucratic and administrative hurdles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Displaced populations across Nigeria continue to rise and seek aid anywhere they can access. It becomes increasingly important to have a displacement fund by the Government. A displacement fund ought to help tackle resettlement, rehabilitation, re-integration and early recovery for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps and host communities. This will help provide the immediate and necessary recovery response, change perceptions and build resilience for IDPs, who are among the world's most vulnerable demographic.

Also IDPs' strong dependence on aid creates an easy avenue for exploitation, navigating a new culture away from home; living in regimented camps and unfamiliar host communities, the ability to adapt to displacement and come to terms with their new found social status has always been a major challenge which they face within the early phases of primary displacement, however, with the passage of time, they build resilience and adapt quickly.

The ultimate intervention is to have IDPs return back home and return their lives to normal or improved levels—providing safety and security, sustained livelihoods and employment, housing shelter, and not remaining perpetually in camps. By going this route, we ensure aid response becomes more effective, visible and impactful. Through advocacy and inclusive rehabilitation, we reduce stigma levels and create sustainable pathways of social integration for the displaced and other populations at risk.

CONCLUSION

We only know the plight IDPs suffer, due to sustained advocacy. While we agree these problems must be addressed solely by Nigerians within Nigeria, negative perceptions and stereotypes can continue to create another Boko Haram or future generations of terrorists unless we address them. Women and children are highly vulnerable and very likely to be re-victimized and recruited by terrorists and many IDPs in camps and host communities still feel neglected and abandoned. They continue to fight trauma, starvation, exploitation, rape, restrictions and other forms of violence – these which should be construed as crimes against their very humanity. There is not one solution to these problem, but solutions must be complex, integrating and must address the variable needs of IDPs. The government must take full responsibility, and must be quick to intervene to assure the physical protection of the rights and privileges of internally displaced persons as enshrined in the African union convention for the protection and assistance of internally displaced Persons in Africa 2009; and the proposed Nigerian National IDP Policy. Without these things in place, without a future for victims and survivors of Boko Haram, their choice is starvation or terrorism.

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